Fellahin MR13
Egyptian Fellahin

105

Identification

The modern Egyptians number about 20,000,000, nearly all concentrated on the 13,000 square miles (out of a total of 363,000) which can be irrigated by the Nile. The language is Arabic, and the people regard themselves as Arabs. The country was conquered from the Byzantine Empire in 639 A.D. by the Arabs, and until 969 was ruled by the Eastern or Abbasid Caliphate as a province with a governor. In the latter year it was conquered by the Fatimite Caliphate of North Africa, which shifted its capital to Cairo. It was during this period, in the middle of the 11th century, that Egypt first underwent a mass invasion of Bedouins from Arabia, many of whom settled down in the Nile valley, mixed with the indigenous peasantry, and brought about the substantial acculturation to the Arab way of life. From 1171 to 1252 Egypt was ruled by the Ayyubid dynasty, who owed nominal allegiance to the Abbasid Caliphate. From 1252 to 1517 came the rule of the Mamaluke dynasties, who had their capital at Cairo and also acknowledged the nominal suzerainty of the Abbasid caliphs. In the latter year Egypt fell to the Turks, and was ruled by pashas from Constantinople. In 1879 began a period of Anglo-French and British control, which was succeeded by national independence in 1923. Except for the small Coptic sect of Christians, the Egyptians are Moslems in religion.

Basic Economy

Primarily agricultural, with plow cultivation, irrigation, and two annual crops. Water is lifted into irrigation canals by man-operated wellsweeps [shaduf] and animal-operated water wheels. The staple crops are wheat, barley, maize, sorghum, and rice [the last mainly in Lower Egypt]. Some broom-corn millet and pearl millet are also grown, but no oats. Other cultivated plants are exceedingly numerous. Legumes and forage crops include alfalfa, broad beans, chick peas, chickling vetch, clover, hyacinth beans, lentils, lupine, peas, and vetch. Tubers and root crops include beets, carrots, leeks, onions, potatoes (very recent), taro, and turnips. Leaf and stalk vegetables include asparagus, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, chive, lettuce, okra, parsley, pepper cress, purslane, rape, rocket, and spinach. Vine and ground fruits include cantaloupe, cucumbers, eggplant, gourds, grapes, pumpkins, strawberries, tomatoes, and watermelons.

Tree fruits include bananas, citrons, dates, figs, jujubes, oranges, pomegranates, and, mainly in Lower Egypt, apples, apricots, mulberries, olives, peaches, pears, plums, and quinces. Condiments and indulgents include anise, black mustard, caraway, coriander, cumin, dill, fennel, fenugreek, garlic, poppies, red peppers, sorrel, sugarcane, and tobacco. Textile plants include cotton, flax, hemp, and jute. Oil and dye plants include the castor oil plant, henna, indigo, madder, safflower, saffron, and sesame. Domesticated animals include cattle, water buffaloes, camels, horses, donkeys, sheep, goats, dogs, cats, chickens, pigeons, and a few ducks, geese, turkeys, and bees. Dried dung is used for fuel, and considerable use is made of milk, butter, and cheese. Hunting and gathering are insignificant, but there is considerable fishing in the Nile. Trade is important, and there are weekly markets.

Sex Division of Labor

Men do most of the agricultural work, tend and milk the larger animals, and engage in trade. Women care for poultry and often for sheep and goats, and they sometimes milk and assist the men in harvesting.

Property

Land is privately rather than communally owned, and can be bought and sold. Most agricultural land is held by large landowners or the government, the Fellahin being largely tenants. Only pasture lands are enclosed.

Inheritance is patrilineal. In accordance with Islamic law, all children share equally except that shares received by daughters are half as large as those received by sons. A man may, however, dispose of his estate by an oral will made in the presence of his children and two male witnesses. When this is done, the eldest son commonly receives a larger share--often about half of the estate.

Social Stratification

Slavery is no longer practiced, but class distinctions are of some consequence. Large landowners and the landless peasantry are clearly distinguished, and there is a small middle class. There is also considerable differentiation.

Fellahin MR13

Egyptian Fellahin

105

Marriage

Marriage involves a moderate negotiated bride-price in money.

Polygyny is permitted up to the Koranic limit of four wives, but it is practiced by only five per cent of the Egyptian population. When it occurs it is strictly non-sororal in form, and the husband establishes each wife in a separate apartment or house. He rotates among them, spending one day with each in turn.

Family

The normal household unit is a small patrilocal extended family consisting of a man and his married sons with their wives and unmarried children. The household usually breaks up after the death of the father, who has strong patriarchal authority. Occasionally, however, sons continue to reside together after the death of their father, but not if they have divided his estate.

Residence

The patrilocal rule prevails. However, in the town of Silwa at least, residence is usually initially matrilocal in the house of the bride's father, and the shift to patrilocal residence comes only after the birth of the first child.

Kin Groups and Exogamy

There is a strong tendency toward local endogamy.

First cousin marriage is common. The first preference is for marriage with a FaBrDa, the second for marriage with a MoBrDa. Premarital sex relations and adultery with a married woman are forbidden.

Descent is patrilineal, with a segmentary lineage system of Arabic type. Both sibs and lineages of all levels tend markedly toward endogamy.

Settlement Pattern

The Fellahin live in compact villages, which are often walled. Streets are narrow and irregular. Dwellings are rectangular in shape, with flat roofs of wooden beams and earth. The walls are constructed of stones or sun-dried brick coated with mud and often whitewashed.

Community Organization

A village tends toward the structure of a patrilocal clan-community. Although it normally includes members of different lineages, these commonly belong to the same sib. Boys are circumcised. Winkler gives the age as 3-5, Klunzinger as 5-10.

Local Government

The village has no council of elders or popular assembly. Silwa today has an elective headman, but for Kiman Winkler reports a local representative of the Egyptian government, called ʿomde, a hereditary sheikh subordinate to him, and a small armed police force controlled by the former.

State

Modern Egypt is a complex state.

Warfare

There is no indication of internal warfare, but blood vengeance still prevails.

Bibliography

Ammar, H. Growing up in an Egyptian Village. London, 1954. (Community study.)

Klunzinger, C.B. Upper Egypt. New York, 1878. (Useful on agriculture.)

Winkler, H.A. Bauern zwischen Wasser und Wüste. Stuttgart, 1934. (Community study.)

175 The map of the world has been changed a hundred times, and with it the map of Egypt; but fundamentals have not changed and the fellaheen have remained the same.

They have taken the strain of all these changes, and never flinched. Violent and repeated shocks have swept away whole peoples, as can be seen today from the ruins of North Africa or Chaldea, which stand deserted in lands peopled by an alien race. But the fellaheen have held firm and stood their ground.

The history of Egypt includes wars and revolutions in plenty, but the people have taken no part in them. Only at one period, between A.D. 725 and A.D. 830, is there any mention of risings in the countryside. Crushed by the taxation of their Arab conquerors, the fellaheen abandoned the villages where they were born and settled elsewhere. These evasive movements became almost general, but the repression was so severe that the Copts decided upon open revolt. Six times they rose, but without unity of plan or action. Six times they were savagely put down. They are not of the stuff of which rebels are made. Moreover, even in these revolts the mass of the people remained unaffected.

175 They are as impervious and enduring as the granite
178 of their temples, and as slow to develop, once established, as this form of art proved to be. The glimpses of their daily life which we get from the wall paintings of Pharaonic tombs or from Coptic legend, from Arab historians or the "Description of Egypt" (²), from early English researchers or the travellers of our own day, seem to form a single sequence. We get the impression that all these scenes, though separated by so many centuries, only repeat and confirm one another.

105 This is not merely an impression. We can see the fellah
178 using the same implements—the plough, the *shadûf*, the *saqia*, the winnowing-fork, the sickle and the straw basket; the same methods of treating the body—tattooing, circumcision, colouring with *kohl* and henna, plucking of hair; and many of the same marriage and funeral customs. Through the pages of Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Maqrîzi, Vansleb, Père Sicard and Volney we can recognise the same fellah. No revolution, no evolution.